
Network Weavers

How to Weave Together Jewish Communal Life

Deborah Fishman

The idea that disparate individuals can come together to become something larger than themselves—whether you call it a tribe, a movement, a people, or a network—has been part of Jewish DNA for millennia. We intuitively understand that banding together gives us not only a practical support system to help us achieve our goals but also enables us to find meaning in life through striving toward shared values, dreams, and identity. For generations, Jewish communal professionals in particular have assumed a leadership role in imbuing this sense of togetherness and working tirelessly to create more synergy in our communities. It has been called community organizing; working with lay leaders and volunteers; facilitating groups; and engaging your alumni, young Jews, or other target populations. Now, there is an additional lens through which this work can be considered: network weaving, connecting others to human, informational, and financial resources, making each person more effective than they could be alone.

Although Jews have been building networks for a very long time, changing paradigms in technology and communication have profoundly influenced some of the rules of engagement. For instance, in the past, factors such as the geographic concentration of a constituency, one's position of authority, or access to an organizational framework were regarded as key to the success of a network or moment. Today, these factors may no longer be necessary at all. Instead, network weavers require the ability to seek out those who identify with one's cause, no matter where they are or when they can contribute; to develop personal, authentic, and give-and-take relationships with and among them; and to engage them in processes that are meaningful to them and move toward concrete goals. At the same time, especially as cultural norms around technology and communication continue to evolve, we are now beginning to see some codification of network-weaving practices, at least outside the Jewish world.

A year ago, I set out on a journey to understand the role of Jewish professionals who are acting as network weavers in this complex environment. What does the role of network weaver really look like in this context? Where are they stuck in executing their assigned tasks, such as engaging young Jews or building an alumni network? What are the challenges inherent in seeking to weave networks inside or amidst the landscape of Jewish organizations that may not have internalized the new way of engagement in their structure and culture? How and to what extent are they understanding—and making the case for—a more networked approach to engagement? Are there challenges and opportunities

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common to those operating in these positions throughout the Jewish organizational world?

I decided that the best way to delve into these complex questions was through adopting a networked approach myself. This meant developing a process by which anyone with productive information to contribute—or who knew someone who did—could get involved; where I could have detailed dialogue and develop relationships with each of them; and where I could share transparently what I learned for the benefit of others seeking to do this work and for the community at large. I interviewed more than 30 network weavers with positions as diverse as Director of E-Communities at the Lookstein Center for Jewish Education, Social Action Coordinator at JHub, and Chief Kehillah Officer at the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism; 26 of these interviews are published on my blog, hachavaya.blogspot.com. Several were also cross-posted on eJewishPhilanthropy.com and in the network-weavers' organizations' blogs and newsletters. Most importantly, a form on my own blog allowed any reader the opportunity to contact me and share their own experiences.

I learned first and foremost that there are so many intelligent Jewish professionals passionate about their work—and about the opportunities that working during this time of new network-weaving paradigms can afford. Although there was some confusion of terms—What exactly is a network? How is it different from a community?—there was also an overwhelming feeling of identification with the concept of a network weaver as descriptive of their work, as legitimizing their work by virtue of its appellation, and as signifying that they must not be alone in doing it.

Through my process of discovery with this initial group whom either I identified or who identified themselves as network weavers, I realized the deep importance for the Jewish world of not just network weaving as a theoretical concept but also of the individual network weavers themselves. Their skills, personalities, and dedication were in many cases what was enabling their networks to take off and certainly greatly informed the ways in which they developed.

For Jewish communal institutions, the lesson is the importance of building internal capacity to work with networks to achieve their goals. This means having staff members who have the skills to be network weavers—and also who are given the necessary time and authority in which to perform this role well. Organizations may need to reexamine the staffing requirements for positions already engaged in this work, such as in communications or alumni relations, as well as to look at who may have a different formal role but who naturally keeps in touch with, convenes, and connects members, past participants, or other constituents. By making this aspect of the organization's work more explicit through examining who is doing it, what the goals are, and whether they are being achieved, the organization can better develop a focused strategy to improve results.

My network-weaving conversations led me to wonder whether a networked approach could be used not only to learn about this area but also to effect change in how it is practiced. I perceived two real opportunities to connect Jewish network weavers to information and to people in such a way that they could practice in a vibrant, collaborative, and, in short, a networked environment. First, because many Jewish organizations are just beginning to imagine what it would mean to operate in this way, it is necessary to go outside of the Jewish world where there

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exists a wealth of academic theory as well as best practices from nonprofits and foundations. We can adapt this knowledge for the Jewish context instead of imagining ourselves in a vacuum. Second, there are many Jewish professionals working in similar roles—such as those I interviewed and many more—who would benefit tremendously from sharing best practices among themselves, thereby increasing their networks' connectedness and effectiveness.

Even as each Jewish organization is working to make itself strong and to build its own network, the Jewish community as a whole is a beautiful and complicated overarching network of all of these networks. In realizing the extent to which we all can learn from and concretely benefit from our interactions with the collective, there is much we can do together, such as building connections, sharing and unpacking information within and outside the Jewish context, and, in doing all of this, fostering leadership through the professional development of our network weavers.

HARESHET (“THE NETWORK”)

In my role as Director of Communications for The AVI CHAI Foundation, a private foundation endowed by Zalman C. Bernstein, I am creating a laboratory for experimentation around how to bring these opportunities to life. In HaReshet, I will bring together selected AVI CHAI grantees from November 2012 to August 2013 to learn together about network weaving; develop and practice skills in a guided and reflective way; and benefit from sharing lessons from each other's work, including both challenges and successes.

In HaReshet, I want to bring alive a vision of network weaving not just as content to be learned but also as a viable structure explaining how and why organizations can embark on a journey of learning with and from one another. In the next section I outline this vision to explain how network weaving may be applicable to any individual organization's context as well as how we as a community will benefit from being woven together, with philanthropies especially well positioned to facilitate this role. This discussion focuses on three components that are both important to the design of the program and instructive to network weaving: the curricular units of the program, learning together, and network leadership within the context of holistic organizational support.

Curriculum: Learning About Networks

The lack of shared definitions of terms associated with network weaving, which I observed in the interviews described earlier and in other contexts in the Jewish world, can be a basic impediment to communication around its practices. Some agreement and awareness of precise definitions are essential to the Jewish community's recognition of network weaving as an important area of Jewish communal work and, conversely, to preventing it from becoming an overused buzzword.

Fortunately, we can turn to expertise outside of the Jewish world to provide a baseline for such definitions. June Holley, who has been working with networks since 1981, created the term “network weaver.” In the Appalachian region of Ohio, Holley started a microenterprise network that enabled hundreds of small businesses to start and expand and mobilized dozens of local organizations to collaborate, self-organize, and create an environment so that those businesses

could work together. She directed the Appalachian Center for Economic Networks until 2005, when she retired. Holley recently wrote the *Network Weaver Handbook: A Guide to Transformational Networks* (2011) to share her expertise and guidance with network weavers everywhere.

In this handbook, Holley discusses both the terminology and the hands-on applications of network weaving. A network is simply any set of people connected by relationships. We all are in a multitude of networks, whether or not we think of them in that way; for example, networks of fellow alumni who went to our college or members of our synagogue. However, networks—particularly of the organizational variety—will not build themselves. Network weavers are those who assume leadership within a network to make sure it is well connected, active, and has other healthy network indicators. They may be paid to do this work, or they may simply be passionate about this group of people and want to connect others to human, informational, and financial resources, perhaps the same that others in the group have given them.

It is certainly true that individuals are perfectly capable, without outside help, of networking, of reaching out to connect with others in the network potentially of interest to them. But network weavers work in a very intentional and strategic way toward achieving certain goals, through activities such as building relationships, providing and facilitating a framework through which members can contribute, and mobilizing others to become leaders in the network as well. Although some are born “connectors,” and innate “people skills” are indeed helpful for network weavers to have, other skills, such as moving relationships to action through a framework of facilitation and project management, can—and should—be developed. In this sense, a network has a different connotation than a community, which is also a group of connected people, but which is not necessarily working toward specific and concrete goals.

A network-weaver position affords a “bird’s eye” view of the network because of the opportunity network weavers have to be in touch with many people in it. Therefore, a network weaver has an enhanced understanding of trends, needs, and strengths in the network as a whole. Equally importantly, the work requires an altruistic perspective, from which network weavers act not out of any one person’s self-interest, but rather with the interest of the entire network in mind. Therefore, a network weaver can bring in the perspectives that will truly move forward the network’s thinking—and action.

The curricular units of HaReshet, based on Holley’s network-weaving handbook, are not only intended for learning about network concepts but also require hands-on work building a vibrant and sustainable network. Their implementation includes activities in which the network weavers engage the network, facilitate internal organizational conversations, and reflect personally on progress through self-assessment and through the construction of case studies.

Learning Together

For several reasons, HaReshet focuses not only on learning but also on applying the concepts of network weaving. First, this topic is very difficult to study on one’s own—these are social networks, after all. It is necessary to experiment, share, and report back to truly begin to learn how networks work. Second, the cultivation of relationships is itself a central principle of a networked approach.

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Finally, network weaving is an emerging field. Even though much has been written, tried, and discussed, practices continue to evolve and there are no easy answers.

In Judaism, the epitome of a peer relationship is *chevruta*, a traditional rabbinic approach to talmudic study. It entails partners studying together with an emphasis on challenging each other to analyze text and answer each others' questions, rather than rote memorization. Ovadiah Seforno, a 16th-century Italian rabbinic commentator, cites the following biblical verse in referring to the benefits of *chevruta* study (http://www.myjewishlearning.com/practices/Ritual/Torah_Study/How_to_Study_Torah/Havruta_Learning_in_Pairs_.shtml) : "Two are better off than one, in that they derive greater benefit from their efforts. For if they should fall, the one will raise up the other, as opposed to if one falls when there is no one to raise him" (Ecclesiastes 4:10–11).

HaReshet's design in which a cohort works through the curriculum together and each participant works with a designated *chevruta* partner reflects this principle. Matched by their experience with and vision and passion around network weaving, these *chevruta* partners discuss, challenge, and troubleshoot the participants' work toward specific goals outlined in a jointly produced work plan. Although they might also be labeled mentors, it is the idea that those with all levels of expertise stand to gain from learning together that animates the *chevruta* partner language.

Network Leadership Within a Context of Holistic Organizational Support

A final principle important to the program is that, although it is difficult for an organization to weave networks without having staff whose job function includes this task, it is also next to impossible for an individual to weave a network without having an organization or a cause around which to weave. Furthermore, just as network weavers need skills as individuals, their successes also hinge on the structure, functioning, and outlook of the organizations in which they reside.

The critical importance to a network's growth and success of a savvy network weaver armed with specific goals is reflected in HaReshet's two criteria to determine whether grantees are currently positioned to be successful in the program. First, the organization must conceive of working with a network as an important part of its mission, and its leadership must articulate what some of the goals of working with that network are or might be. Second, it has someone on staff with the job description, interest, and available time to devote to these network-weaving goals. The idea is to work with grantees for whom engaging constituencies in a networked way is currently on their minds and agenda—whether or not they are articulating it as network weaving. The goal of HaReshet is to build on the resources that organizations are already allocating and to maximize impact through professional development for network weavers. No monetary grants are being given to the selected grantees toward this work.

It is critically important that the work of the organization be tied into the work of the network weaver, and vice versa. Throughout the HaReshet program are opportunities to share learnings with colleagues internally, solicit their input and ideas, and otherwise benefit from their perspectives as to how the units are applicable to their particular organizational context. In addition, part of the *chevruta* partner's role is to consult with the network weaver about this specific

context and how the process can be tailored more specifically to fit his or her needs. This close integration recognizes that network leadership is not about one leader—the network weaver or anyone else—making all of the decisions unilaterally. Rather, network weaving recognizes the value of productively engaging the expertise of many from different perspectives and encouraging each to take leadership roles in his or her own right. Through this integration, the network weaver, together with colleagues, ideally can start to apply the lessons of working in a networked way to other parts of the organization internally, in addition to the external network.

No network weaver functions in a vacuum. There are informative lessons, examples, and opportunities for collaboration to be gained from dialogue with other network weavers, in other organizations, with differing levels of experience, and outside the Jewish context entirely. Even closer to home, it is critically important for network weavers to collaborate with colleagues to implement a network that suits their organization's context and can inform work beyond that external network.

THE ROLE OF A FOUNDATION IN NETWORK WEAVING

I am especially fortunate to have the opportunity to create the HaReshet experiment within my role at The AVI CHAI Foundation because foundations' unique position in a nonprofit landscape lends itself to network weaving in several ways. First, they have a bird's eye perspective of the fields in which they operate. As a result, they are positioned to identify trends and challenges in those fields, as well as to understand which players might have resources to offer others. Second, they are endeavoring to make an impact on their fields through tackling complex social challenges. Network weaving is one way in which foundations can take action based on their field-wide vantage point and work toward creating that change.

The AVI CHAI Foundation invests in a wide range of initiatives that further Jewish literacy, religious purposefulness, and peoplehood/Israel at Jewish day schools and summer camps. Although grantees are united around these three core values, they each represent a different path toward making them come to life. Given that AVI CHAI is sunsetting in 2020, it is especially important to the foundation that it leave a legacy of strong organizations that can consciously articulate and promote its values to future generations. It can create this legacy by bringing together these grantees who perceive themselves as operating in very different contexts and helping them understand the ways in which they are working toward similar goals. HaReshet may be the one place where some grantees can realize not just how to make each individual network more effective but also begin to think about how they are part of a bigger picture and how to enhance that greater whole.

Some of the ways foundations can work with networks, which HaReshet exemplifies, have been identified in the general literature, for instance in "Catalyzing Networks for Change: A Funders' Guide," by the Monitor Institute and Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO):

- *Catalyst*: Establishing the value propositions of network-weaving through acting as a thought leader in this emerging area; setting a precedent for both how to support grantees and affiliates in this way.

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- *Weaver*: Acting as a convener; helping grantees find new connections both for their individual networks to grow and between networks; and expanding the network to new participants. This helps all parties visualize the fields in which these grantees operate and contributes to their connectivity and development.
- *Assessor*: Diagnosing the network's progress and what it needs next, through documenting the functioning of different types of networks and the outcomes of different conscious strategies and decisions. In addition, writing case studies increases our understanding of network-weaving, its challenges, and its potential for success.

MOVING FORWARD

At its core, HaReshet provides those in Jewish network-weaver positions with professional development. At the same time, it does not just develop the network weaver but also fosters holistic support throughout the entire organization; beyond that, it can help the entire field to learn together. This progression serves to highlight our interconnectedness as Jewish professionals and as that quintessential network, the Jewish people. Although these principles of network weaving were gleaned from a general rather than Jewish source, they truly are applicable to our organizations and community and all we stand to gain from weaving a more vibrant Jewish people together.

HaReshet may serve as one opportunity to begin translating this theory into practice and to provide some much-needed documentation and data for this emerging field. Such data may help us begin to answer the following questions: What is realistic to expect for a Jewish organizational network's growth in this time frame? What metrics will be most useful to understand a network's growth, and which are not as helpful? How will different organizational and personal factors affect different networks' progress? How will having models of very intentionally and successfully operating networks in the Jewish world affect the conversation, understanding, and practice of network weaving, and where will they take us in the future?

The discovery and implementation of big ideas and bold solutions for the Jewish people require an awareness of how our organizations and our constituencies are already changing, together with a vision of how to not only respond to these changes but also to harness them to achieve new heights in Jewish engagement and vibrancy. Drawing on trends in communications, technology, and engagement both inside and outside of the Jewish world, network weaving may provide one way forward. At the same time, our knowledge base of how to harness networks in a Jewish communal context is currently in its infancy. I hope that embarking on this journey together with many network-weaving colleagues will enable us to better understand and realize the promise of Jewish network weaving and look forward to where it leads us next.

REFERENCE

Holley, Jane. (2011). *Network weaver handbook: A guide to transformational networks*. Athens, OH: Network Weavers Press.